

## **Japan's Far Right in East Asian Geopolitics: The Anatomy of New Xenophobic Movements**

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to explain the sudden rise and success of Japan's xenophobic far right movements in the late 2000s. While older far right groups were royalists and anti-communists indifferent to immigration issues, new right extremists specialize in attacking Korean and Chinese migrants with strong xenophobic sentiments. Although far right movements accuse Koreans and Chinese of enjoying 'special privileges,' such accusations are ungrounded in reality. Yet far right movements have succeeded in recruiting many young supporters. Why is this the case? Based on in-depth interviews with new right activists, I aim to clarify what is behind the hate against Koreans and Chinese, focusing on the influence of East Asian geopolitical predicaments. I argue that the new xenophobic right is generated by entrenched cold war sentiments and the lack of reconciliation between Japan and other East Asian countries. The data reveal that new far right activists were first fascinated by historical revisionism that justifies Japan's imperialism and/or outrages against the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea. They believe Japanese sovereignty is threatened by both South Korean and Chinese protests against Japan's revisionism and the North Korean abductions. Far right activists then began to identify the Korean and Chinese governments with Korean and Chinese migrants, thereby regarding them as 'enemies within' who engage in subversive activities.

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### 1. Introduction: Far right Movements in East Asia

Undoubtedly, it is European countries that were the most influenced by far right movements and parties, but the scholarly focus on these countries has led to a Eurocentric understanding of the far right phenomenon. In fact, research on the far right initially focused on Western Europe, and eventually expanded, albeit in a limited fashion, to include Eastern Europe, North America, Australia and Israel. In her comprehensive analysis of the far right worldwide, Norris remarks as follows:

In East Asia...Although these countries contain a variety of small right-extremist groups..., no relevant radical right parties were identified from standard reference sources..... Political parties in the newer democracies of East Asia often tended to consist of elected legislators grouped around leadership factions and splinters, usually poorly institutionalized, with centrist competition, rather than presenting a clearly defined ideological profile, stable organization, and party program. (Norris 2005: 77)

Her analysis is misleading in two ways. First, if her argument is correct, East Asian countries have never seen the rise of far right parties. However, far right parties can also be generated under newer democracies. In addition, Japan has a century-long experience of party politics. Secondly, though they have been politically negligible, there have been far right parties that originated from prewar fascist political organizations in postwar Japan. A new far right party called *Ishin Seito Shinpu* (New Wind Restoration Party) has also been running for Upper House elections since 1998, though it only gained a maximum of 0.3% of the total vote for proportional representation in 2007. In this sense, the paucity of research on Japan's far right as well as Norris's misleading conclusions are understandable if we consider the vast amount of literature on European countries in which "no party family has been studied as intensely as the populist radical right" (Mudde 2007: 2).

Studying Japan's far right warrants special attention in several respects. First and foremost, xenophobic movements have rapidly grown in the past few years, and have changed the characteristics of Japan's far right organizations. Second, although Japan's foreign population accounts for only 2% of the total population – a proportion much smaller than those of most European countries – over the last two decades, the foreign population has doubled in size to exceed two million. Third, while there are no important far right parties, Japan also sees far right politicians that are comparable to those in European countries. Lastly, the unique characteristics of Japan's far right, as will be described below, require theories that are different from those based on European experiences.

In terms of the first point, there are old and new far right movements whose objectives are quite different from each other. On one hand, the former are royalists and anti-communists (Szymkowiak and Steinhoff 1995), with ideologies that are strongly inherited from prewar fascist organizations. Their main enemies were the Soviet Union and the Japan Teachers Union instead of migrants. In addition, the old right has also included quasi-outlaw cadres with connections to the mafia, making mass mobilization impossible. On the other hand, the latter is xenophobic, focusing on the “privileges” that former colonial citizens (mostly Koreans) enjoy. Since such new far right organizations were established in the last decade, thousands of ordinary citizens with little experience in social movements have mobilized through the Internet and taken to the streets over migration issues.

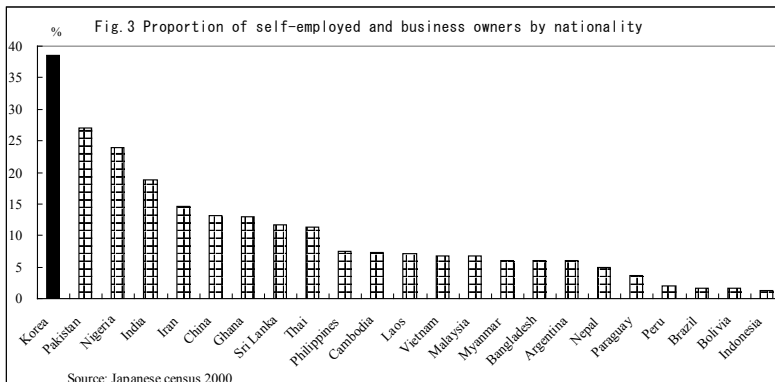
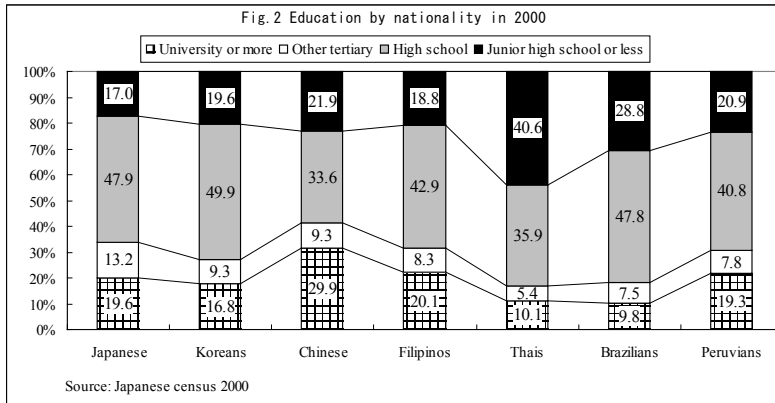
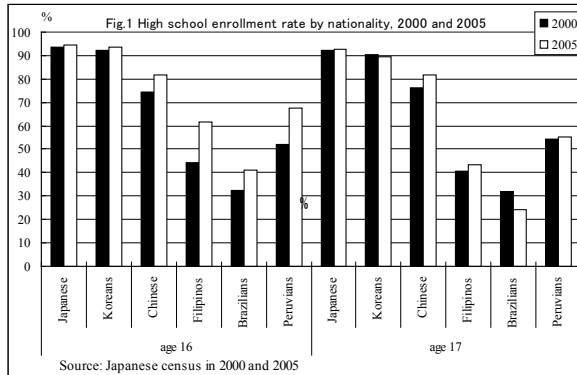
## **2. The Puzzle**

At first sight, the rise of Japan's new far right movements seems to be a symptom of convergence with the European far right. Yet, there is one crucial difference between the two. European far right groups are hostile to migrants who, according to xenophobic claims, have failed or will fail to be integrated into host societies. Such anti-immigrant ideologies such as cultural racism, welfare chauvinism and

Islamophobia are based on the premise that migrants are economically burdensome or culturally troublesome. They are also opposed to newcomers because they believe they will bring about troubles in the future. Behind the rise of far right parties lie widespread anti-immigrant sentiments (Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2000; Brug and Fennema 2003).

On the other hand, two thirds of Japan's foreign population is composed of Koreans and Chinese. Far right movements attack mostly oldcomer Koreans and sometimes Chinese who are socially and economically well integrated in Japan. Figure 1 shows that the enrollment rates for high school differ greatly by nationality group. The rate for Koreans is the highest among the foreign population groups, and is close to that of Japanese. The proportion of university graduates is lower for Japanese (see Figure 2), but this is because of the overall lower education levels of the elderly; Koreans achieved upward mobility because there is little difference in education attainment levels between young Japanese and Koreans (Kim and Inazuki 2000). Despite discrimination in the labor market, Koreans, as a whole, gained relatively better-paid jobs by establishing their own businesses (see Figure 3). Chinese are also among the well-off newcomers as many graduated from Japanese universities and secured professional jobs in Japan.

In the European context, such successful groups are unlikely to be attacked by the majority population. Rather, Brazilians and Peruvians, suffering from low socioeconomic status and poor educational attainment, would be harassed by far right groups if they were in Europe. To put it in another way, Japan's far right attacks East Asian "model minorities."



My question is then: *Why does the new far right target Koreans and regard them as threats to Japan?* This appears to be a simple puzzle as many Japanese have looked down on Koreans. However, it is worth examining as things are not as simple. They should have been the target of assaults by far right groups if discrimination automatically generates organized racial harassment, but the old far right groups that attacked the Soviet embassy were rather indifferent to East Asian migrants, and these migrants were far from being an important target of far right groups until xenophobic groups were established in the late 2000s.

### **3. Theory: From a Dyad to a Triad Model of Xenophobia**

#### *(1) Dyadic Models for Far Right Movements*

In European countries, most studies on immigration and/or xenophobia are based on dyadic models that analyze the inclusion and exclusion of migrants vis-à-vis host societies. Liberal or policy-oriented studies focus on social/economic/political rights and the acculturation of migrants for gradual integration. Research on migrant rights completed the first stage when political rights of migrants were theorized in the early 1990s (Brubaker 1989; Hammar 1990; Layton-Henry 1990). Migrants were expected to enter the inner circle of Figure 4 in the course of time. Although the term ‘integration’ sounds assimilative, ignoring the distinctiveness of migrant groups, arguments on integration are based on the premise that migrants can be and should be included in host societies.

In contrast, far right groups assume that the integration of migrants is a pie-in-the-sky dream because they assert that migrants insist on maintaining their own ways while ignoring the rules and norms of host societies. Such racist logics of cultural threat were used by Front National since the 1980s and spread across Europe. The other logic of exclusion is ethnic competition, which regards the emergence of xenophobic movements as a result of competition over scarce resources (Olzak 1992). Ethnic competition theory can also be applied to political competition, but

almost all studies on the far right focus on economic – more specifically, labor market – competition (e.g. Lubbers et al. 2002; Lubbers and Scheepers 2000).

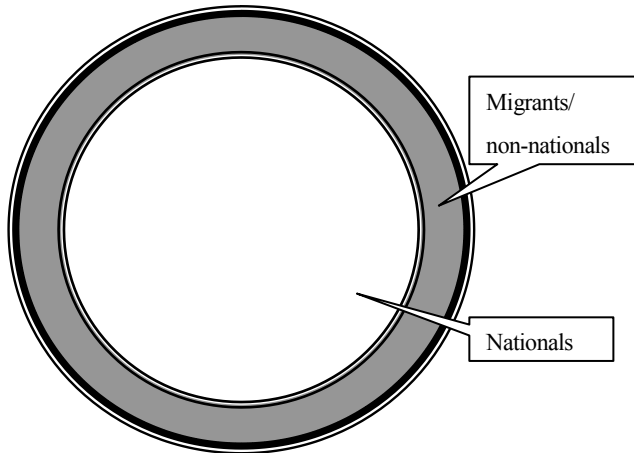


Figure 4 A dyadic model of immigrant exclusion

Note: Modified Hammar (1990: 17)

Despite these differences in extant theories on the emergence of the far right, these theories have one thing in common: they traverse the views of “methodological nationalism” and are based on a dyadic model of hosts and migrants in nation states. But such logic of integration can only be partially applied to Koreans in Japan. On the one hand, Koreans are socioeconomically integrated in Japan as I mentioned earlier (in terms of sociocultural aspects, see Chapman 2008 and Fukuoka 1993). On the other hand, normative discourses emphasize the “diasporic” nature of Koreans in Japan, and imply that they are not simply taking the path toward integration into Japanese society (Lie 2008; Ryang and Lie 2009). As I will examine in further detail in the following section, this is also related to my research question which focuses on the gap between Koreans as the socioeconomically integrated and Koreans as the

target of xenophobic movements.

*(2) A Triadic Model for Far Right Movements*

Instead of the dyadic model, I propose a triadic model to explain the emergence of new far right movements in Japan (cf. Söderberg 2011a, 2011b). Here Brubaker's work on East European nationalism provides clues to establish a necessary framework (Brubaker 1996). Analyzing a mosaic of nations in Eastern Europe, he focused on relations between the nationalizing state, national minorities and the external national homeland.

Nationalizing states are “ethnically heterogeneous yet conceived as nation-states, whose dominant elites promote (to varying degrees) the language, culture, demographic position, economic flourishing, or political hegemony of the nominally state-bearing nation” (Brubaker 1996: 57). In this paper, I classify Japan as a nationalizing state because of its inclination to mobilize nationalism for national integration in the post-cold war era.

A national minority is “a dynamic political stance, not a static ethno-demographic condition. Three elements are characteristic of this political stance, or family of stances: (1) the public claim to membership of an ethnocultural nation different from the numerically or politically dominant ethnocultural nation; (2) the demand for state recognition of this distinct ethnocultural nationality; and (3) the assertion, on the basis of this ethnocultural nationality, of certain collective cultural or political rights” (Brubaker 1996: 60). Koreans in Japan are a special case of a national minority. Because they migrated from Korea to Japan as Japanese nationals until the dismantling of the Japanese empire in 1945, their postwar legal status has been determined by bilateral negotiations. Koreans distinguish themselves from other migrants because they were ‘past nationals’ under Japan's colonial rule.

According to Brubaker, “a state becomes an external national ‘homeland’ for ‘its’ ethnic diaspora when political or cultural elites define ethnonational kin in other



states as members of one and the same nation, claim that they ‘belong,’ in some sense, to the state, and assert that their condition must be monitored and their interests protected and promoted by the state” (Brubaker 1996: 58). While studies on Koreans in Japan emphasize the importance of the Korean peninsula as the divided homeland, I would like to focus on the influence of bilateral relations on Koreans in Japan.

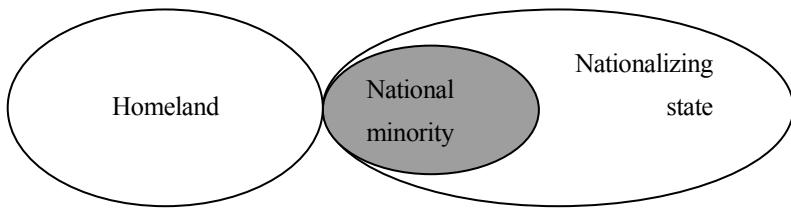


Figure 5 Triadic model of migrant exclusion

These features of Japan's Korean population as a national minority are all the more important considering the East Asian geopolitical context. In general, the triadic model expects politics in-between: they demand various rights as local residents in host societies, while they sometimes get involved in bilateral conflicts as a national minority. In terms of the far right's hatred against Koreans in Japan, it seems strongly related to geopolitical changes that occurred after the collapse of the Cold War. When Japan's hypothetical enemy was the Soviet Union during the Cold War era, old far right groups “pilgrimaged” to the Soviet embassy in Tokyo, asserting with loud speakers to return the northern territory occupied by the Soviet Union. But such geopolitical concerns did not bring about attacks on Soviet nationals in Japan as the population was too small to assault.

The end of the Cold War precipitated changing geopolitical conditions between Europe and East Asia. While Europe moved towards integration, East Asia saw various issues triggering turbulence in international politics within the region.

Regarding the Japan-Korea relationship, among the issues at stake are “territorial disputes over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands, the way history is portrayed in textbooks, whether Japan has apologized with sincerity for its past deeds in Korea, the ‘comfort women’ or Japanese prime ministers’ visits to the Yasukuni Shrine” (Söderberg 2011: 1). In addition, the abduction of Japanese by North Korea and its nuclear crisis further worsened the bilateral relationship. These tensions stem from the ongoing Cold War in East Asia and Japan’s failure to deal with its historical burden concerning its past deeds and reconciliations with neighboring countries which Japan invaded in the last century. These two factors make East Asian geopolitics unstable, thereby stunting the growth of regionalism (Rozman 2004).

My hypothesis is that such geopolitical conditions underlie the emergence of new far right movements: *The xenophobic sentiments of Japan’s far right movements are not generated by Korean migrants themselves, but have originated from a hatred for neighboring countries.* The end of the Cold War shifted the rightists’ enemies from the Soviet Union to Japan’s East Asian neighbors who Japan must negotiate with to settle one dispute after another.

#### **4. Data**

The principal data for this paper was collected from 34 interviews with 33 far right activists conducted between February 2011 and June 2012. All informants were engaged in xenophobic movements. Despite the attention given to research on the far right in Europe, there are strikingly few scholars who have actually conducted interviews with activists (e.g. Art 2011; Berezin 2007; Goodwin 2011; Kimmel 2007; Klandermans and Mayer 2006; Linden and Klandermans 2007; Virchow 2007). This is due to limited accessibility to far right activist informants, who are typically engaged in violence and possess negative images of social scientists. Due to the lack of empirical data, it is, however, crucial to conduct fieldwork to analyze Japan’s nascent far right movements. I approached four far right organizations and

conducted interviews with their cadres. Four out of 33 interviewees were paid staff, while 29 were either working elsewhere or attending school as university students. Each interview lasted one to four hours and was recorded and fully transcribed by the author. Other characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Profiles of activists

	Gender	Age	Education	Contact with migrants	Its effect	Primary concern	Period of involvement
A	M	40s	University	Worked with Chinese	negative	Historical revisionism	05-
B	M	30s	High school	Neighbours	negative	Foreign worker	90-94
C	M	30s	University	Korean neighbours	negative	Old-timer Koreans	95-99
D	M	20s	University	Studied at an international school	became nationalist	Historical revisionism	05-
E	F	20s	University	Schoolmate	no effect	Overstayer	05-
F	M	20s	University	Schoolmate	no effect	Historical revisionism	05-
G	M	30s	University	Schoolmate	no effect	Anti-Human rights	05-
H	M	40s	High school	Schoolmate	no effect	Historical revisionism	05-
I	M	40s	University	Schoolmate	no effect	Territorial disputes	05-
J	F	40s	University	Schoolmate	no effect	Beijin Olympics	05-
K	M	40s	University	Schoolmate	no effect	North Korea	00-04
L	M	50s	University	Schoolmate	no effect	Anti-democrats	05-
M	M	50s	University	Neighbors	no effect	Education	80s
N	M	30s	University	Colleagues	no effect	Historical revisionism	05-
O	M	40s	University	Colleagues	no effect	Anti-democrats	05-
P	M	20s	University	no contact	no contact	Emperor system	00-04
Q	F	20s	High school	no contact	no contact	Historical revisionism	05-
R	M	20s	University	no contact	no contact	North Korea	05-
S	M	30s	High school	no contact	no contact	Historical revisionism	05-
T	M	30s	University	no contact	no contact	Coincidence	05-
U	M	30s	University	no contact	no contact	Coincidence	05-
V	M	30s	High school	no contact	no contact	Overstayer	05-
W	M	40s	Vocational school	no contact	no contact	Anti-Japan demonstration in China	05-
X	M	30s	Postgraduate	no contact	no contact	FIFA World Cup	00-04
Y	M	40s	Vocational school	no contact	no contact	Historical revisionism	05-
Z	M	40s	University	no contact	no contact	North Korea	05-
AA	F	40s	High school	no contact	no contact	Beijin Olympics	05-
AB	M	40s	University	no contact	no contact	FIFA World Cup	05-
AC	M	40s	University	no contact	no contact	Emperor system	95-99
AD	M	50s	High school	no contact	no contact	Foreign worker	60s
AE	M	50s	University	no contact	no contact	Nationalism	70s
AF	M	60s	University	no contact	no contact	Tiananmen incident	80s
AG	M	60s	University	no contact	no contact	Emperor system	60s

## 5. Analysis

According to Table 1, the majority (18 out of 33) had no contact with migrants (or non-Japanese) before joining far right organizations. In addition, only four recognized the influence of contacts with migrants on their activities. In this sense, their xenophobic sentiments are far from based on their own experiences.

Table 2 Factors that generate far right movements

	National	International
Economic	Ethnic competition	Economic nationalism
Sociocultural	Racial threat	Influx of East Asian culture
Political	Political dealignment	East Asian geopolitics

To verify the hypothesis, I will examine which factors were crucial for activists to join far right movements (Table 2). I asked the interviewees about critical events or initial concerns that led to participation. The dyadic model suggests that national (economic, sociocultural and/or political) factors are of significance, while the triadic model expects that international (especially political) factors will be of larger importance. I will illustrate the results by explicating findings from the interview data.

### *(1) National-economic factors*

None of the 33 interviewees made reference to national-economic factors and concerns such as job competition. Such results would seem surprising in the European context, but in Japan, it is only natural that ethnic competition will not generate far right movements. Due to the smaller proportion of migrants within the total population, coupled with low unemployment rates, it is unlikely that Japan will see the rise of far right movements due to national-economic factors.

(2) *National-sociocultural factors*

Six out of the 33 interviewees claimed that national-sociocultural factors influenced them. Two mentioned the local presence of migrant workers in the early 1990s when Japan experienced its first postwar massive inflow of undocumented foreign workers. But they regarded this influx as threat to law and order rather than ethnic competition. Two other interviewees talked about the impact of the Chinese riot in Nagano during the Beijing Olympics torch relay. AA says:

*I watched the Chinese riot in Nagano during the Beijing Olympics torch relay. It was on the top web news of Biglobe (major Internet provider in Japan) and I was led to Youtube or another website. Then I saw a girl crying surrounded by Chinese national flags. I felt a sense of danger and thus I joined the free-Tibet movement.*

It was not only AA but also V who happened to watch xenophobic web videos while surfing the net:

*About two years ago, I just coincidentally encountered a speech of our president when I was surfing the net. Because it was one of the most viewed, I casually watched and found it full of impact. He not only spoke against the partial legalization of the Calderon family (Filipino irregular migrants applying for special permission for stay/residence), but he also did it in front of the Immigration Bureau Office. It was impressive.*

(3) *National-political factors*

Only four out of the 33 interviewees mentioned national-political factors. Two felt a sense of crisis that confusion would reign throughout the country when the centrist Democratic Party of Japan won the general election in 2009. At first they were not xenophobic and joined far right organizations for the purpose of protesting

against the DPJ government. Another interviewee, AG, has been engaged in far right activities for forty years. At first he was a royalist rather than xenophobe and had long been inactive due to frequent job transfers. After coming back to Tokyo, he found his field of activity in the following way:

*When I went to a lecture organized by a rightist organization in 2002 or 2003, Kenzo Yoneda, a former conservative members of parliament, spoke passionately about the risks of suffrage for foreigners. Surprised to hear it, I realized how terrible the issue was.*

*(4) International-economic factors*

None of the interviewees pointed out the influence of international-economic factors. Although there are some rightist factions that oppose global economic governance structures, such as WTO, IMF and APEC, they are not attracted to xenophobic activities.

*(5) International-sociocultural factors*

Interestingly, two out of the 33 interviewees talked about the influence of the FIFA World Cup. Held in 2002 and co-organized by Japan and South Korea, South Korea won fourth place, a first time feat for an Asian country. X remarks as follows:

*It was South Korea's anti-Japanese reports during the World Cup that drove me to activism. First and foremost, though it was to be held solely in Japan, the secretariat suddenly decided to co-organize just before the tournament started. At first I welcomed it. But they won out by unfair means and foul and never cheered on the Japanese team.*

*(6) International-political factors*

As my hypothesis predicted, 15 interviewees mentioned international-political factors. Historical revisionism triggered eight activists. Historical revisionism should originally be regarded as a national-political issue, but they regarded it as a matter of Korean and Chinese intervention in Japan's internal affairs. S explains:

*I was not a conservative from the beginning. One day, I happened to listen to a radio program that dealt with World War II. I got interested in it because it offered fresh viewpoints based on conservatism. So we can view history in a different way. Free from the leftist thinking that Japan started the invasion to trouble other countries, I found another historical reality. I came to understand that it was not invasion but self-defense and Japan's effort to liberate of East Asia.*

In terms of response frequency, after historical revisionism comes abduction of Japanese by North Korea. This issue has raised Japanese nationalism resulting in the nationwide spread of support groups for the abductees. K notes:

*I used to vote for Socialists or Communists. The critical event was that of the abduction of Japanese by North Korea which was disclosed in 2002. In that year, I clearly felt like moving in the opposite direction. It was just a change in my mentality, but quite a few people changed their minds back after 9/17 (when Kim Jong-il recognized and apologized for the abductions during Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang).*

In addition to hate directed toward North and South Korea, China and the Chinese in Japan have become new targets. Seeing a newly emerging superpower, many Japanese feel threatened by China. This has precipitated into xenophobic movements. Proclaiming himself as a non-xenophobe, interviewee I expressed his resentment of China's arbitrary behavior and Japan's weak attitude toward



diplomatic negotiations with China.

*The most decisive event was the territorial disputes over the Senkaku Islands (in 2010). I knew China was a country of rude behavior, but I was angry about the Japanese government's responses rather than the actions of China. This is also the case with the dispute over Takeshima Island. I regret why this country cannot defend its own territory.*

## **6. Discussion**

Results from the previous section are summarized in Table 2. The most salient feature of Japan's far right/xenophobic movements is that they have not been driven by economic factors. This is quite different from their European counterparts that mobilize the working class by stirring up narratives about threats to the labor market. Furthermore, Japan's activists are relatively educated. Seven are high-school graduates, three are vocational school (a kind of tertiary education) graduates and 23 are university graduates or dropouts.

Secondly, as the racial threat model suggests, sociocultural factors have something to do with the rise of far right movements. However, only six interviewees mentioned "migration issues" as reasons for involvement. It should also be noted that the majority joined the movements without any contact with migrants. Moreover, the direct encounters with migrants that surfaced in the interview data did happen recently but in the 1980s and 1990s. This suggests that activism was triggered by "imagined" or "virtual" threats.

Thirdly, the majority of activists were attracted to movements with political interests. This is especially true for international-political issues. The results show that Japan's far right movements are political ones, pointing to the need to study political – especially East Asian geopolitical – conditions that trigger the far right in Japan.

Table 2 Factors to generate far right movements

	National	International
Economic	None	None
Sociocultural	(6) Influx of foreign workers Prejudice towards Korean neighbors Legalization of irregular migrants Chinese behavior for Beijing Olympics	(2) FIFA World Cup
Political	(4) Change of government to DPJ Foreigner's suffrage Human Rights Protection Law	(15) Historical revisionism Abduction by North Korea Territorial disputes with China Anti-Japanese demonstrations in China Tiananmen square protest in 1989

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